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Tower Commission's Scathing Report Dims Reagan Foreign-Policy Outlook

WASHINGTON INSIGHT

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WASHINGTON—There is little Ronald Reagan can do to regain the offensive on important foreign-policy issues in the wake of the Tower Commission's scathing report on his lackadaisical handling of critical national security issues.

Since the scandal broke in November, the White House has been preoccupied with damage limitation, allowing other problems to fester. The administration is more divided than ever on arms control, and over the weekend, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev grabbed the initiative by opening the way to a deal eliminating intermediate-range nuclear forces in Europe.

In addition, Mr. Reagan's Central American policy is unraveling, his policy of "constructive engagement" with South Africa is dead, and the debacle in Iran has increased the danger that Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism may overwhelm suicidal little Lebanon and the wobbly Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

True, the president has moved to rebuild his foreign-policy team. A new national security adviser, Frank Carlucci, has purged the National Security Council staff. The president has replaced White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan and Central Intelligence Agency Director William Casey.

Slow Going

But even these housecleaning efforts haven't been smooth. Although it was clear for weeks, if not months, that Mr. Regan would have to go, the White House was slow lining up a replacement, former Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker. The president's nominee to succeed Mr. Casey, veteran CIA analyst Robert Gates, has run into trouble on Capitol Hill, and his nomination may be withdrawn.

But even with new players in many of the top posts, the president, who promised to make America "stand tall," needs two of his leading enemies, Mr. Gorbachev and Syrian President Hafez Assad, to help bail him out. Mr. Reagan's good luck is legendary, but neither leader seems likely to come to his aid.

At first glance, Mr. Gorbachev's offer to eliminate all the medium-range nuclear missiles aimed at the U.S.'s European allies appears to be just the sort of break Mr. Reagan needs. But the proposal could add to the pressure on the weakened U.S. administration, not ease it.

The president still hasn't overcome the confusion from the Iceland summit, where he and Mr. Gorbachev discussed abolish-

ing strategic weapons, ballistic missiles, or all nuclear weapons. Mr. Gorbachev's latest offer to negotiate a separate deal on medium-range missiles in Europe is likely to score propaganda points in Western Europe and to put pressure on the president to respond by accepting restrictions on his Strategic Defense Initiative in exchange for a more far-reaching strategic arms control agreement.

Division Among Advisers

Also, while half of Mr. Reagan's advisers, mostly at the State Department, believe Mr. Gorbachev has unprecedented incentives to strike a deal, the other half, mostly at the Pentagon, seem bent on making sure one is never struck.

In December, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger began a campaign to convince Mr. Reagan to declare that the U.S. would begin deploying missile defenses in space as soon as possible, and to announce that the administration had decided to honor a new and looser interpretation of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty.

So far, Secretary of State George Shultz, with help from U.S. allies, has stymied Mr. Weinberger. But the battle isn't over. SDI and the nation's military buildup are virtually all that remains of Ronald Reagan's national security legacy, and the president may be even more reluctant to agree to curbs on Star Wars now than he has been in the past. "It's about all he has left," says one top administration official.

SDI Concessions

But the president's troubles may have reduced Mr. Gorbachev's incentive to offer new concessions on SDI. "Gorbachev is doing very well on the propaganda front," says a leading Republican foreign policy analyst. "Now the Soviet leader looks great and the American looks senile. If I were the Russians, I'd sit tight for a couple of years."

An even less likely opportunity for Mr. Reagan to escape his troubles appeared last week in Lebanon, where Syrian troops began cracking down on pro-Iranian fundamentalists. If Syrian President Assad wanted to do the president a favor (and perhaps help end Syria's diplomatic and economic isolation from the West), he could send his troops into West Beirut's lower Basta district and free the American hostages that U.S. intelligence analysts believe are being held there.

Barring such unlikely gifts, Mr. Reagan may be forced to spend the rest of his presidency on the defensive, fending off challenges from Mr. Gorbachev, Iran, the Congress and others.

"It's going to be two years of paralysis and drift," predicts one White House aide.